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JCS FOR CHASE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)  
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR GENERAL BOONSRANG'S COUNTERPART  
VISIT WITH CJCS ADMIRAL MULLEN

Classified By: Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Embassy Bangkok is extremely appreciative that General Boonsrang Niumpradit will be able to conduct a counterpart visit with CJCS Admiral Mullen. The visit will reinforce the importance of Thailand to our regional security interests as the United States and Thailand celebrate 175 years of relations. It will be an opportunity to underscore the United States Government's commitment to working with a democratically-elected Thai government and to working with the Thai military on issues of mutual importance. End Summary.

BOONSRANG - WEST POINT GRADUATE MAKES GOOD  
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¶2. (C) General Boonsrang attended West Point and maintains close ties with senior U.S. military officers and classmates from other countries. He attended Norwich University prior to West Point and also received an MS from MIT and a PhD from the Asian Institute of Technology. General Boonsrang has consistently been receptive to USG initiatives and has been provided a calm, reasoned voice during recent political conflicts. He ably led the UN Mission in East Timor for a year, was a strong advocate for Thai participation in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and was a key player in the RTG pledge of an infantry battalion for the Darfur peacekeeping force. General Boonsrang was critical to engineering Thai acceptance of the Defense Resource Management Study, pushing for the project to spur Thai defense reform and transformation. He was also the proponent for the creation of a strategic studies center that he views as a complement to the Asia-Pacific Center for Strategic Studies.

THE OVERALL SECURITY RELATIONSHIP  
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¶3. (C) The U.S.-Thai security relationship is based on over fifty years of close cooperation. Thai soldiers, sailors and airmen participated in the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts, and Thai troops served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Prior to coup sanctions, Thailand was the fourth largest participant in the U.S. International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. Thailand's willingness to allow the United States to use Utapao Naval Air Station as the hub for our regional tsunami assistance program was key to making Operation Unified Assistance a success and greatly assisted relief flights to southern Burma which began after the recent devastating cyclone. Utapao remains vital to our interests in the region and is accessed by close to nine hundred flights annually, primarily in support of operations in Iraq

and Afghanistan.

#### THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

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14. (C) Bilateral relations with Thailand are very good, and we are optimistic that this will be the case going forward. Post-coup restrictions on our military engagement were lifted February 6 and the RTG has continued to signal its desire for a close mil-mil relationship. The goodwill generated by America's quick and massive response to the December 26, 2004 tsunami was palpable. Thailand is a Treaty Ally, has been firmly supportive of the War on Terror, and has participated in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), which led President Bush to declare Thailand a Major Non-NATO Ally in his October 2003 visit to Thailand. American businesses have over \$23 billion in direct investment in Thailand and the United States is Thailand's single largest export market and its second-largest foreign investor, after Japan.

15. (C) Responding to last year's recent crackdown in Burma, then-Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont used his appearance at the UN General Assembly to criticize publicly the Burmese regime's actions in a manner that we viewed as constructive. In general, however, the Thai bureaucracy, and especially the military, fears instability in Burma will spill over across Thailand's border where Thailand currently accounts for over 140,000 refugees from Burma held in detention camps along the Thai-Burmese border. Thailand relies on Burma for thirty percent of its energy imports as well. These factors incline Thailand to want to preserve the status quo. We believe it

will be necessary to keep pushing the RTG on Burma so it does not allow commercial ties or concepts of ASEAN solidarity to overshadow human rights concerns.

16. (C) The Thai government sees refugee issues as a security matter and has assigned the National Security Council as the lead policy agency on the issue. Most of the 140,000 Burmese refugees stay in nine official camps along the border. The RTG has allowed a large-scale US resettlement program, and about 13,000 Burmese will enter the US from Thailand this fiscal year. However, about 6,100 Lao Hmong are kept in a Royal Thai Army-run facility in northern Petchaboon province. The Thai have set up an internal, non-transparent screening process for this vulnerable group, which may include individuals (and their descendants) who assisted the U.S. during the Indochina war. We are uncertain, however, whether the Thai screening process will meet international standards; the Thai have refused to allow UNHCR to play any role in these refugee determinations. We believe that a portion of the group, but not a majority, may have a legitimate claim to refugee status and could face harsh treatment by the Lao government if returned. We want to take every opportunity to underscore to the RTG the importance of providing international standards of protection to those who might have a well-founded fear of return. Thailand is also the preferred interim destination for a small number of North Korean asylum seekers who wish to resettle in the U.S.

#### MILITARY EXERCISE PROGRAM

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17. (C) Thailand gives the U.S. military a platform for exercises unique in Asia. Thailand offers the United States military good base infrastructure, large areas in which our aircraft and ground forces can conduct unrestricted, though not unilateral, operations, and access to bombing ranges -- all in short supply in Asia. Located near strategic maritime choke points and having good liberty ports, Thailand also has the potential to play a greater role in U.S. naval planning. Perhaps due to their lack of a colonial heritage, Thai leaders are far more willing to host multilateral exercises than are other countries in Asia. Unlike Japan, which only hosts annual bilateral exercises due to legal prohibitions over collective security, or Australia, which avoids multilateral exercises so as not to "dumb down" its own

training opportunities, the Royal Thai Government supports multilateral exercises as a way to show regional leadership. This has allowed us to use our exercises in Thailand to further key U.S. objectives, such as supporting Japan's growing military role in Asia and engaging the TNI. In 2008 we completed the first multi-lateral FTX phase of the major JCS-directed COBRA GOLD exercise, in addition to CPX and UNPKF pieces.

#### REGIONAL MARITIME SECURITY

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18. (C) As part of an effort funded by Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2006, we worked closely with PACOM and Embassies Manila, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and Colombo to develop regional maritime security architecture to improve communications, domain awareness, and intercept capabilities in the waters surrounding Southeast Asia. The Thai portion of the initiative, approved by Congress but suspended as part of coup sanctions, was a layered approach to assist the Thai military secure territorial waters while also providing coverage of the northern shipping lanes feeding into the Strait of Malacca. Encouragingly, on January 23 the Thai Cabinet earmarked funding to support maritime patrols in conjunction with Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia in the Straits of Malacca beginning October 1 this year. We intend to work closely with the Thai government on maritime security.

#### PEACEKEEPING EFFORTS

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19. (C) Thailand has been an active contributor in peacekeeping missions, best known for General Boonsrang and General Winai Phattiyakul, the Ministry of Defense Permanent Secretary, leading the UNTAET force in East Timor. The Thai government last year committed to deploying a battalion of peacekeeping troops to Darfur, but the Government of Sudan has so far refused to agree to allow the United Nations to

include Thailand as troop contributing country for UNAMID. The Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters also has ambitious plans to develop a regional peacekeeping operations center.

#### DEFENSE REFORM

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110. (C) General Boonsrang has been a key proponent of defense reform and was the driver for Thailand's acceptance of the Defense Resource Management Study (DRMS). The Thai military leadership approved DRMS Phase Two, which is intended to design and adopt better resource management processes. Additionally, on 20 December 2007 (just three days shy of the national election) the interim National Legislative Assembly passed the Ministry of Defense Reform Act. This act includes many articles to make the Thai military more joint in nature and provide increased influence for the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters over the component services. However, the implementation of this act may only cause superficial changes to the overall military system instead of providing for needed far-reaching reforms in budgeting, procurements, government oversights, and overall military capabilities.

#### THE ROLE OF THE ARMY

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111. (C) The Royal Thai Army (RTA) is a legacy force faced with serious modernization issues. The RTA is still primarily designed to defeat the large conventional threat that Vietnam represented in the mid-1980's. On paper, the RTA would seem to possess the capability to defeat a large conventional attack -- however, it is plagued by an almost universally low operational readiness rate.

112. (C) Much of this decline in effectiveness is due to the budget constraints that were imposed from 1997-2001 after the Asian Financial Crisis. Since that time, budgets have increased slightly, but not to pre-1997 levels. Increasing

the military budget shortfall was a key focus of the interim government, allowing all the services to improve their capabilities. The increase in the military's budget, during a period of economic uncertainty, was controversial, but resulted in RTA purchase of South African REVA 'V-hulled' 4x4 troop transport vehicles, Israeli rifles, and the planned purchase of Ukrainian armored personnel carriers.

¶13. (C) While the RTA has a long history working with the U.S. Army, recently we have also been working with MARFORPAC and III MEF to improve links between the U.S Marine Corps and the RTA. In many ways, our Marines are perfect training partners for the RTA, and field exercises in Thailand afford our Marines many opportunities they do not have elsewhere in Asia.

#### THE NAVAL RELATIONSHIP

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¶14. (C) Our overall links with the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) are good, but the relationship languished during the post-coup period in which USN ship visits ceased. Prior to the coup, we were working closely with the RTN on potential projects like the 1206 Andaman Sea Maritime Security Initiative and worked with PACFLT and Seventh Fleet to increase the tempo of U.S. Navy ship visits. U.S. aircraft carrier and other ship visits have been well received by the RTN, received front page and prime time media coverage, and were successful opportunities to demonstrate the benefits of the U.S.-Thai security relationship. Recently, the Chinese have improved their ties to the RTN as mentioned above. Likewise, the RTN has been developing a closer relationship with the Indian Navy and has conducted some exercises with the Indians.

¶15. (C) Through our security assistance program we have been working to develop a closer relationship with the RTN by engaging them at every opportunity. We have offered them EDA items such as the S-3 aircraft, and are working with them to consider U.S. military articles and services over that of other countries like China. The RTN has responded positively to our efforts despite budget limitations. Some of the projects we are working with RTN include efforts to purchase the SeaVue radar, support for P-3 aircraft, and increased FMS funding in support of the Harpoon Weapon System. We also expect the RTN to attempt to purchase two more MH-60 helicopters.

¶16. (C) In addition to supporting our annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise with Thailand, JUSMAGTHAI has worked closely with RTN Special Warfare units to increase their capacity. USN SEALs have helped to provide their Thai counterparts with some impressive capabilities. For instance, Thai SEALs regularly conduct exercises aimed at protecting oil and gas platforms in the Gulf of Thailand. This NSW relationship was compellingly demonstrated during the tsunami response when USN and RTN SEALs rapidly deployed to Phuket to assist in the recovery efforts. The Prime Minister was photographed in a recovery boat manned by the SEALs. Despite their improved professionalism, the Thai SEALs are not well-supported by senior RTN officials.

#### THE AIR FORCE RELATIONSHIP

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¶17. (C) The RTAF has close ties to the USAF. Training in F-16 and C-130 programs has established a solid history of cooperation and shared expertise and experience. The annual COPE TIGER flight training exercise among the United States, Thailand and Singapore is the largest joint/combined air combat exercise in Thailand. The RTAF recently purchased Saab JAS-39C/D Gripen fighters and Saab 340 Erieye AWACS aircraft to replace their F-5 fleet. The Gripen is fully NATO compatible and will contain significant U.S. technology. We are urging the RTAF to proceed with a Mid-Life Upgrade for existing F-16A/B planes.

DEMOCRACY RESTORED BUT TENSIONS REMAIN

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¶18. (SBU) Despite Thailand's peaceful transition to an elected government earlier this year, underlying tensions remain unresolved, and ongoing anti-government protests and domestic political conflict continue to keep the Thai government preoccupied. In 2005, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra won an overwhelming majority in the parliament, but was later accused of corruption, abuse of power, and disrespect for the much-revered monarchy. In September 2006, following months of political protests and legal battles that led to a political stalemate over charges against Thaksin and his party, the Thai army launched a coup d'etat which many Thais accepted as a means to resolve the protracted political crisis.

¶19. (C) The victory by the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party (PPP) in the December 2007 election, however, marked a setback for supporters of the coup. The PPP was able to form a coalition government headed by its party leader, Samak Sundaravej, a former Governor of Bangkok and Minister of Interior. Tensions remain, as Thailand has yet to establish a stable balance of political power among factions of the urban elite and the rural population. Then-Prime Minister Thaksin was abroad when the coup took place, and he remained overseas until the PPP administration took power. Upon return, Thaksin and his family faced a range of court cases for abuse of power and corruption and Thaksin's wife was convicted of tax evasion at the end of July. Thaksin and his family fled in early August for the UK, and the former prime minister alleged that the Thai judiciary was treating him unfairly, that Thailand remained under the influence of the "dictatorship" that took power after the 2006 coup d'etat, and cited threats to his physical safety.

¶20. (C) The anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) staged a mass demonstration in Bangkok and strategic points around the country August 26 in a what was claimed to be a final show-down with the government of Samak. Protesters occupied the grounds of Government House, forcing the Prime Minister to conduct business from the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters. The RTG has as of August 28 refrained from using force to clear the protesters despite court orders to arrest the PAD leaders and for the protesters to clear the Government House compound.

#### MILITARY QUIETLY IN THE BARRACKS

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¶21. (C) Despite pre-election speculation about whether the Royal Thai Army would tolerate a PPP administration, the Thai military has refrained from an active role in the continuing political drama. Samak appointed himself Defense Minister --

a civilian Defense Minister is rare but not unprecedented in Thailand. The military has shown a willingness to work cooperatively with Samak, and the Prime Minister has apparently allowed the military much leeway in drafting the important annual military reshuffle that will take effect October 1. In a significant departure from 2006, there seems now to be a widespread recognition that military-installed governments have no special capability to resolve Thailand's political problems. Army Commander Anupong Paochinda has repeatedly confirmed, both privately and publicly, that he has no intention of involving the Army in resolving the political conflict.

#### SOUTHERN THAILAND

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¶22. (C) Recent Thai governments have struggled to quell the ethnic Malay Muslim-led insurgency in southern Thailand, a region that has witnessed episodic violence since its incorporation into Thailand in 1902. Regional violence has claimed some 3000 lives since January 2004, when the separatist movement accelerated attacks. The interim government of Prime Minister Surayud made some attempts at ending the violence through reconciliation, but a lack of



political support and preoccupation with the on-going political crisis in Bangkok caused these efforts to stall.

¶23. (C) Since this round of violence erupted in 2004, separatist attacks have become more complex and sophisticated, in terms of tactics and use of Improvised Explosive Devices. The root causes of the insurgency -- government neglect, human rights abuses, and a lack of social justice, combined with a desire for some form of self-determination, have not been addressed by any Thai government to this point. The southern insurgency has not yet been a priority for Samak's government, likely due the ongoing political conflict. As such, the Thai military remains the lead actor in trying to address the violence in the South.

¶24. (C) Although there has not yet been evidence of Jemaah Islamiyah involvement in Southern Thailand, JI has exploited similar Muslim separatist and religious tensions in Indonesia, and we remain concerned by the possibility that southern unrest may attract international terrorist groups.

¶25. (C) Southern separatists direct their anger at the government in Bangkok, not at the United States. Since a U.S. presence or perception of U.S. involvement in the South could redirect that anger towards us and link it to the international jihadist movement -- a link that is currently absent -- we ensure that any offers of assistance or training pass the "location and label" test. Put simply, we keep U.S. military personnel away from the far South, and we make sure that we do not label any assistance or training as directly linked to the southern situation. Likewise, we work to avoid feeding rampant, outlandish speculation that we are somehow fomenting the violence in the South in order to justify building permanent bases -- a very sensitive issue in Thailand. We do not want to jeopardize our access to key military facilities in Thailand like Utapao Naval Air Station.

¶26. (C) The Embassy maintains a three-pronged focus to improve our military cooperation in order to address the violence in the South:

- 1) Using our exercise and training program to improve the professional and operational skills of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, especially the Thai Army;
- 2) Helping the Thai break down stovepipes between the Thai military, police forces, and civilian agencies;
- 3) Doing everything we can to ensure the Thai respect international human rights norms as they counter the violence.

#### THE ROLE OF CHINA AND INDIA IN THE REGION

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¶27. (C) Southeast Asia continues to feel the rising influence of China and India. While emphasizing the vital role of the U.S. in the region -- and Thailand's desire to intensify U.S. engagement -- Thai leaders also focus on developing stronger relations with the two regional powers. The Thai military has a number of Chinese weapons systems in its arsenal. While Thai military links with the United States are deeper and far more apparent than Sino-Thai links, China's growing

influence in Thailand and Southeast Asia is evident in business, the arts, the media, and the military. China and Thailand recently completed the Strike-2008 anti-terror joint training exercise in northern Thailand, the second year of joint special forces exercises. The PLA Navy has close links with the RTN and have conducted a major ship visit to Phuket.

After jointly holding a limited naval exercise in the Andaman Sea in 2005, Thailand and China are exploring conducting joint search and rescue exercises. The RTN has acquired several ships from China over the past decade. China is refurbishing tanks and air defense equipment provided to Thailand in the late 1980's. Mil-to-mil exchanges between China and Thailand have expanded in recent years as has the number of bilateral military VIP visits. There have also been unspecific reports of future joint missile development. India's "look east" policy has impelled the country to forge closer ties with Thailand as well.

WE LOOK FORWARD TO THE UPCOMING VISIT

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128. (C) General Boonsrang and the U.S. Embassy team look forward to opportunity for this counterpart visit and to sharing views on how best to promote our mutually supported strategic interests in Thailand and the region. In all meetings with General Boonsrang's delegation, we suggest US officials emphasize that Thailand is a valued partner and that the U.S. stands ready to assist the Thai military in moving forward on defense reform via the DRMS process, force modernization plans, and peacekeeping initiatives. We should stress that the United States and Thailand both benefit our defense cooperation.

JOHN